

Missiles that hit the same foxhole twice or episodes from October 4 tragedy

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As the proverb says, shells cannot hit the same foxhole twice. However, life is different. Everybody remembers an explosion in an apartment house in Kiev's suburb of Brovary on April 20, 2000, which killed 3 and injured 3 residents.

In the distance of 90 km from Brovary the military was carrying out training launches and the surface-to-surface Tochka-U missile manufactured by the Votchinsk plant in Russia in 1990 went out of control. Immediately after the accident, the Ministry of Defence defiantly rejected any link to the explosion in Brovary and alleged that the missile successfully hit the target located 30 km from the training range, missing it by just 8 meters. The military confessed its guilt only 4 days after...

In May 2000, following the explosion in the town of Brovary, Ukraine's Defense Minister Oleksandr Kuzmuk said that it would be unfair if he made a noble gesture and resigned, thus, deserting his troops and hiding from the tragedy. «It is much more difficult to stand up to the end, protect the innocent, punish the guilty and prevent reiteration of the tragedy», the army chief said (Fakty i Komentarii, May 5, 2000).

However, the tragedy happened again. The time and the place were different but the same army officers played the leading roles.

On October 12, the State Commission of the Russian Federation established to investigate into the Sibir Airlines Tupolev-154 crash made public its preliminary conclusions, reading that the plane was hit by the warhead of an anti-aircraft missile as it was flying over the Black Sea on its way from Tel Aviv to Novosibirsk.

The airliner plummeted into the sea on October 4 around 185 kilometers from the city of Sochi with the loss of all 78 people on board. According to the information available at the moment, most passengers were recent Russian immigrants to Israel and 15 victims were Russian citizens.

A number of theories have been put forward for the crash, including an act of terror and that it was accidentally shot down by a missile. The latter version appeared, as the crash had taken place not far from the training ground located in Cape Opuk, where Ukraine's military had been carrying out exercises at that time. During those annual exercises, Ukraine's anti-aircraft defense corps fired S-200, S-300, S-125, Buk and Kub missiles.

Americans were the first who pointed the finger of blame at Ukraine. On October 4, the CNN quoted an official in Washington saying that it was a tragic incident caused by a mistake during military training. However, this information was not officially confirmed. Meanwhile, press agencies were describing the methods that could be used by the US military to track the situation during Ukrainian military exercises. They focused on the two American low-orbit satellites from «Lacrosse» and «Improved crystal» series. According to the Ukrainian Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies, those satellites are used to monitor the situation in Eastern Europe and the former USSR. Though, despite sharp tones in the American and Russian mass media comments, no official statements about Ukraine's involvement in the tragedy were made for several days.

Hours after the crash, Ukrainian army commanders started to deny any responsibility. For example, Defense Ministry spokesman Ihor Khalyavinsky said, «Right after the catastrophe, air defense experts together with their colleagues from the Ukraerorukh had gone over all data about the zone of exercises and adjacent areas. The missiles were fired exclusively within a restricted zone, 30-35 km out to sea from the shore, and the tragedy with the aircraft occurred 250 km from the area where the exercises were taking place» (the Day, October 5, 2001). Other Ukrainian military officers agreed with the statement. Gen. Volodymyr Tkachov, the air defenses chief, told the news conference that everything was going on according to schedule and furnished the details. «Ukrainian anti-aircraft missiles targeted

9 out of 11 unmanned aircrafts circling over the sea in the distance of 10-30 km, while one target self-destructed and yet one landed by parachute nearby the launch site on accomplishment of its mission», the general said. Making efforts to prove that Ukraine's defense forces were not related to the Tu-154 crash, Volodymyr Tkachov accentuated that the missiles were fired exclusively within a restricted zone, whereas the tragedy occurred 250 km from the training ground.

Furthermore, Ukraine's Defense Minister Oleksandr Kuzmuk asserted that the Russian passenger jet crashed after the first stage of Ukrainian air defense exercises had been completed.

He said, «Ukrainian and Russian military exercised control over the training launches in 22 points and established that all the missiles fell on schedule and none of them fell at the moment of airliner crash.» (the Day, October 6, 2001). According to the Minister, all 23 missiles fell within the close range of maximum 40 km and none of them was fired in the direction of the Russian Tu-154 airliner.

Meanwhile, the commission investigating the disaster was gathering more and more evidence that it had been caused by an S-200 missile. «Fragments found on the Sibir Airlines Tu-154 crash site and in victims' bodies are very similar to what used to be an S-200 missile», spokesman for the Commission Gleb Gutiev said on October 9 (UNIAN, October 9, 2001).

Notwithstanding the progress of investigation, Ukraine's Defense Ministry went on refuting all accusations. So, Oleksandr Kuzmuk, in his address to the Verkhovna Rada on October 9, repeatedly denied the rumors that Ukrainian air defense forces could have been linked to the crash of the Russian airliner and offered at least 5 arguments against Ukraine's involvement in the disaster. Though, speaking in the parliament, the Minister for the first time mentioned that military officials were ready to consider any versions of the tragedy.

Ukrainian Foreign Ministry officials showed their solidarity with the military. On October 9, Foreign Minister Anatoliy Zlenko told the MPs, «there are no reasons» to blame Ukrainian air defense forces for bringing down the Sibir Airlines Tu-154 and «there are good reasons to consider the issue very cautiously and duly protect foreign policy interests of our state» (UNIAN, October 9, 2001).

As far as behavior of Ukrainian officials is concerned, they seemed to have no doubt that offence is the best defense. However, they should have «protected the interests of the state» in a different manner by means of establishing transparent investigation and bearing full responsibility.

On October 10, the Defense Ministry promulgated the speech of Oleksandr Kuzmuk in the Verkhovna Rada, stressing that the missile version could not be categorically rejected. «The Defense Ministry is making all efforts to deeply and comprehensively analyze consequences of the launches, studying all existent versions of the Tu-154 crash, inclusive of the missile one, and is ready to provide unbiased information to any interested parties», the publication in the October 11 issue of the Day newspaper read. In the light of preceding categorical rejections of any involvement, the above statement could be regarded as the first irresolute step towards acknowledgement of fault.

Findings of the Russian State Commission further changed the attitude of Ukraine's military. «The air crash could only be caused by the unintended destruction of the plane by a missile», head of the Defense Ministry PR department Kostyantyn Khivrenko conceded on October 12 (the Interfax-Ukraina, October 12, 2001).

For the time being, it is possible to conclude that Ukraine's relations with its strategic northern partner will not deteriorate regardless of the final conclusions of the investigation. At the same time, Russia will be able to make Ukraine another proposal to enter into the joint air defenses system using the fact that the disaster was caused by the Ukrainian military as an irrefutable argument. In his speech in the Federation Council of the Russian parliament on October 10, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov said, «Military cooperation within the CIS is of multi-level and multi-speed nature» and indicated that «cooperation in the frameworks of Collective Security Treaty includes joint air defense training.» Incidentally, on February 10, 1995, Ukraine had de jure joined the CIS air defenses system but de facto cooperated with other members only on the basis of bilateral agreements. At present, it is hard to say whether cooperation between Ukraine and Russia in this field will deepen.

Most likely, resignation of Ukraine's Defense Minister that seems imminent under the circumstances

will not take place. The above assumption is based on the statements of president Kuchma who called Oleksandr Kuzmuk «a man with high moral qualities» (though, «good man» is not a profession) and refused his resignation tendered on October 4 immediately after the first report implying that the airliner had been hit by a missile.

Noteworthy, current presidential comments on supposed resignation of the Defense Minister are very similar to those after the tragedy in Brovary in April, 2000. Then, the president said that before accusing anyone «it is necessary to find out the causes of what has happened» (the Molod Ukrainy, April 28, 2000). As for the recent tragedy, even establishment of the causes fraught with negative foreign policy implications did not weaken the Minister's position.

It is beyond any doubt that the crash of the Russian plane will adversely affect Ukraine's international image. Recent events have proved that the state and its military pose danger both to Ukrainians and their neighbors. In the aftermath of terrorist attacks in the United States and in the light of development of the new international security architecture, world response to Ukraine's role in the Tu-154 crash can be especially negative, limiting the country's participation in solution of important global issues.

The stance of officials in Kyiv, first and foremost, their persistent silence and non-transparent behavior will also essentially contribute to formation of the world community's negative attitude to Ukraine. Unfortunately, Ukrainian officials failed to admit timely and frankly that the country was involved in the disaster and showed their inability to estimate the situation and assume responsibility. The last two weeks have demonstrated that the national political and military leaders cannot act in a civilized manner, being rather inclined to silence facts and protect personal or group interests. The above proves that neither the military commanders nor executive officials have drawn proper conclusion from the tragedy in the town of Brovary.

It can be expected that the world community will introduce economic sanctions against Ukraine analogous to those imposed on the USSR after the Korean plane had been shot down the Soviet air defense forces. Though, experts believe that by virtue of international law Ukraine will only be liable for compensation for direct losses. The Russian Sibir Airlines is going to suit Ukraine's Defense Ministry for inflicted losses in the amount of nearly USD 10 million. Department head of the Aviation Insurance Bureau Co. Svitlana Havrilenko pointed to the fact that «should Ukraine's Defense Ministry act more frankly, the amount of reimbursement may be reduced» (UNIAN, October 10, 2001).

Ukrainian political leaders should understand that all their actions and words relating to the tragedy will inevitably be assessed from the standpoint of compliance with principles of civilized behavior. For the time being, results of such an assessment would be really distressing.